

SEEDA's Achievements for: Supporting the Rural Economy 1999-2003



Farmers' markets are a key outlet for local food producers.

Introduction

The rural economy and the management of the region's countryside are an essential part of the vitality of the region.

SEEDA works with other major partners such as the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the Countryside Agency and the South East England Regional Assembly to help develop rural policy. SEEDA influences to ensure a rural dimension to the work of a wide range of organisations, raising the profile of rural issues across the region and the dissemination of best practice. SEEDA has a cohesive network of rural partners co-ordinating the efforts of public, private and voluntary sectors and also has a dedicated Rural Board Committee to advise on rural issues.

Regional Economic Strategy (RES)

Rural issues are integral to the revised Regional Economic Strategy (RES), and are included in all five themes:

- **Competitive Businesses** – through support for Enterprise Hubs and Gateways, Sectors and Clusters and support for business through the Small Business Service and Business Links;
- **Successful People** – through a range of skills initiatives;
- **Vibrant Communities** – in regeneration areas and small rural towns;
- **Effective Infrastructure** – improving rural Broadband;
- **Sustainable Use of Natural Resources** – making use of new opportunities through farm diversification, rural tourism, local produce and crops for industry or renewable energy.

Key Facts

- The region has a large rural area – two million people live in the region's rural areas.
- The region has more than 160 small rural towns with a population of less than 20,000 and more than 1,400 villages.
- Around 24 per cent of businesses are situated in rural areas.
- The South East has 11 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty [AONB] and one Heritage Area which cover 32 per cent of the region – more than any other English region. Two of them, The New Forest and The South Downs, have been proposed as the first National Parks in the South East.
- One third of England's unimproved lowland meadows and 40 per cent of lowland heaths are in the South East.
- The four most wooded counties in England are in the South East (Surrey, Hampshire, East Sussex and West Sussex). Kent has more semi-natural ancient woodland than any other county.
- There are 22,000 registered farm holdings in the South East (DEFRA, Agricultural Census 2002).

Results

Since SEEDA commenced operations in April 1999, its investment has been the catalyst for the following rural achievements:

- More than 494 rural projects supported.
- 643 new jobs created and 476 safeguarded.
- 73 redundant buildings brought back into productive use.
- 1,160 training opportunities between three and 30 hours.
- 37 new businesses created.
- 1,453 rural-based businesses assisted.
- 13 new community building projects supported.
- 38 projects supporting local produce.
- 138 new bed spaces created on farms.
- 186 childcare places created.

SEEDA is working with the livestock sector, encouraging local producer groups that link the farmer, the meat processor and the local food outlets.





Woodlands – cultivation and maintenance of woodlands, such as this, is a key element of the rural economy in the South East.

Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SME) Assistance

SEEDA continues to work with the six Business Links in the region and develop its network of Enterprise Gateways.

Chiltern Woodworks Enterprise Gateway has a primary objective of fostering the furniture making skills of the Chilterns to promote the use of local timber resources. The initiative will aim to encourage the development of start-up companies in the furniture and wood-based sectors and to nurture their growth. In particular, this Enterprise Gateway will look to harness Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College and Rycotewood College's strength in the furniture sector and the availability of timber from local woodlands, which represent 21 per cent of the designated 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (AONB).

Skills training continues to be delivered through rural programmes and specific initiatives have been developed to improve skills in woodland coppice work and food preparation/butchery skills.

Livestock

The lack of local infrastructure for the red meat sector continues to cause concern. SEEDA's work in this sector is ongoing, using a Livestock Facilitator - appointed as a result of the recent Foot and Mouth crisis – to work with the abattoir businesses in the region. SEEDA works very closely with DEFRA and the project-based schemes of the England Rural Development Programme and several new schemes have been successfully steered through this route.

Farm Diversification

SEEDA's direct support to farmers is channelled through grants to convert redundant farm buildings into new uses. This provides the farmer with additional income that helps to maintain a viable business. Farmers are the main managers of the landscape that is one of the key assets of the region. Nineteen schemes have been completed this year providing new businesses and local jobs and new tourist accommodation.

SEEDA is also raising awareness of opportunities for diversification using new crops for oils, fibres or the pharmaceutical industry. SEEDA staged a major conference in London to promote these opportunities.

Local Food

SEEDA works with the region's local food groups and the regional South East Food Group Partnership and has sponsored several events to promote local produce – for example the Hampshire Sausage and Pie Competition where more than 50 local butchers were awarded 'gold certificates'.

Rural Tourism

SEEDA continues to promote opportunities for 'green tourism' involving walking, cycling and riding and the provision of additional self-catering and Bed and Breakfast places on farms across the region.

New Crops e.g. lavender – SEEDA staged a conference to explore the potential for industrial crops in the region, particularly examining oils and crops for the pharmaceutical sector.

Woodland Regeneration and Renewables

SEEDA continues to work with the Forestry Commission and woodland businesses to look for new opportunities for products from the region's woodlands, particularly for use of wood for renewable energy. SEEDA has promoted the use of wood as a fuel through providing wood boilers to some of its own developments and other partner projects such as Norbury Sawmill in Surrey and Bedgebury Pinetum in Kent.



SEEDA co-sponsored The Hampshire Sausage and Pie Competition. Pictured above is the winner of the Supreme Champion prize (right) receiving his trophy from Councillor Michael Woodhall, Deputy Leader of Hampshire County Council (left).



Rural Communities

- **Regeneration Areas** - parts of East Sussex, the Isle of Wight and parts of Kent are identified as areas where there is a concentration of deprivation. SEEDA has supported a number of projects this year to assist communities in these areas. A co-ordinated approach is led by local Rural Partnerships and projects have tackled a range of issues and delivered integrated support to both social and economic regeneration.
- **Redundant Buildings** in these areas have been converted into new uses using SEEDA funding, creating new jobs and new businesses. One example is Whitecross Business Centre near Sandown on the Isle of Wight. At this site, two redundant two-storey portal frame buildings have been converted into 22 office units and a 1,800 sq. ft. industrial unit. The development of the site will provide valuable accommodation for companies on the Island, and will help to reduce the waiting list of companies wishing to move into vacant premises.
- **Eleven Small Rural Towns** have been selected to receive support from SEEDA. They have undergone a formal 'health-check' process, have developed business plans and projects are progressing. For example, Heathfield in East Sussex has carried out improvements to its High Street and improved access for the disabled. The proposal outlined in the Regional Economic Strategy to expand this rural programme across the region has been progressed by SEEDA working with the South East Rural Towns Partnership.
- Five areas of the region - Mid Kent, East Sussex, the Isle of Wight, the New Forest and West Oxfordshire - have been successful in being accepted onto the new European rural programme called **Leader+** and they are developing their Action Plans. SEEDA has committed funding to these five areas.

The majority of these community programmes have been devolved to local partnerships and delivered directly by them.



Whitecross Business Centre, Isle of Wight – where two redundant buildings have been converted into 22 office units and an industrial unit, providing valuable commercial accommodation on the Island.

Battle is one of the first 11 small rural towns to benefit from SEEDA's Small Rural Town Fund. It has carried out a health-check to look at strengths, weaknesses and new opportunities and has developed its business plan for action.



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